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ABSTRACT

The "focus group discussion," a qualitative technique often used in market research, has been a useful tool in corporate exploration of employee child care needs and preferences and has led to the development of management policy regarding child care. The child care focus group has helped the employer learn more about employees' child care concerns and the extent and urgency of these concerns. In addition, these groups have assisted management in addressing parents' needs. The group process, which involves 8 to 10 employees in a 2-hour discussion of their experiences as consumers of child care, has been divided into three distinct phases: the preparation, the group discussion, and the subsequent report. The company and a facilitator usually decide upon child care topics to be discussed in the session. Employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction and available and affordable care are considered. In addition, focus groups have used a questionnaire or survey to provide quantitative research for more effective assessment. Employers have received valuable guidance from employees' experiences and have thus been assisted in shaping more effective corporate policy. (BJD)

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catalyst

14 East 60th Street
New York, N.Y. 10022

Telephone: 212-759-9700

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FOCUS GROUPS

A Needs Assessment Approach to Corporate Child Care Policy Planning

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A position paper from
Catalyst's Corporate Child Care Resource

FOCUS GROUPS: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPROACH TO CORPORATE CHILD CARE POLICY PLANNING

The focus group discussion, a qualitative research technique often used in market research, can be a useful tool in corporate exploration of employee child care needs and preferences, and can lead to the development and clarification of management policy regarding child care.

This paper explores the focus group process as used by Catalyst to assist companies in determining effective ways to help working parents with child care and to help the companies with short- and long-term planning. The benefits of using focus groups to collect information about child care are discussed, as are some of the corporate concerns regarding use of this tool.*

Purpose And Benefits Of Focus Group Discussion

The management teams of many companies are likely to have witnessed some employee concern about child care. The company may even be aware that there is a high turnover rate among well-trained, valuable employees because adequate care cannot be found or retained after maternity leave. The child care focus group is a tool for helping the employer know more about employees' child care concerns, their extent and urgency, and the manner in which they would be best addressed. Appropriately used, a focus group can expose relatively simple problems for the company to address, as well as more complex ones requiring more research and long-range planning.

A company is under no obligation to resolve the concerns that surface during discussion groups. It may limit itself to reporting back to employees about the major issues identified in the groups, an action indicating the employer's interest and concern. It might then appoint a task force consisting of a cross section of employees to investigate potential solutions, thereby sharing the dilemmas involved in decision-making. If at that point the company is prepared to act on concerns, it can decide which of the issues it can address and which need more consideration or are inappropriate to address at all.

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*While focus groups are a useful and important part of the needs assessment process, companies planning a corporate child care policy must take into account certain additional factors. These include the evaluation of existing community child care resources for corporate use and the consideration of the company's specific objectives, such as competitive recruitment, a positive corporate image, and improved employee morale. Although this paper does not address these issues, a complete needs assessment should involve these components as well.

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When Time Inc. in New York City approached Catalyst during the information-gathering phase of their research on parent employee concerns they were aware of a number of potential problems: the high cost of child care, the difficulty of finding it, and the isolation of working parents in general. While some employees' concerns were already evident, the total problem and an appropriate solution were not clear. Catalyst conducted discussion groups with Time employees to clarify the picture, so that Time could recognize and examine the issues and subsequently plan for appropriate responses. Catalyst discovered, for example, that employees at every level needed information services. Such services could make the child care search less haphazard and more systematic, and also make higher quality care easier to find. Catalyst also found that parent employees needed opportunities to talk to each other and to have access to information about children and parenting. These were all relatively easy problems to address.

Time could not, however, immediately help its employees with the high costs of child care, which, in this case, would involve restructuring its benefits package. Such a change had to be researched more extensively and considered as part of company long-range planning. Other issues, such as the need to clarify company policy regarding use of personal sick leave to care for sick children, may also need further research and examination before a company decides to act on them. But once the decision is made, it can be implemented quickly.

The focus group is a simple, unobtrusive tool used with a limited employee population to illuminate the many parts of an unfamiliar, sometimes murky problem. It facilitates more complete, accurate decision making, enabling the employer to respond more effectively to employee concerns.

The Group Process

A child care focus group is a two-hour group discussion with eight to ten employees focusing on their experiences as consumers of child care. The size of the group allows all to participate and the setting encourages an open exchange of thoughts.

The process of conducting focus groups may be divided into three distinct parts: the preparation phase, the group discussion itself, and the subsequent report. Preparation involves both the employer and the facilitator. Together they decide on the topics to be covered and determine, based on employee population, the number of groups to be run. For instance, experience has shown that putting non-management and management employees in separate groups is likely to result in more open discussion than mixing the two types. Similarly, mixing men and women appears to be less effective than separating them. At Time, Catalyst conducted focus groups for three different employee groups: management, non-management, and editorial staff. (Editorial staff members were perceived as having concerns specific to their work and schedules which differ from those of other Time employees.) Other companies may choose their own groupings, separating hourly and salaried employees, for example, or conducting groups for different shifts with distinctly different needs. The company randomly selects participants for the groups, aiming for a cross section of employees.

The focus group must be led by an unbiased outside facilitator who will respect the confidentiality of employees' comments and who is not likely to prejudice the group toward a particular point of view. The faciliator is responsible for preparing specific questions for the discussion and deciding on the format and structure of the sessions.

The organization or person conducting the group is responsible for reporting back to the company in a way that conveys the substance and spirit of each group, including specific comments made (though not attributed to particular employees), important aspects of the group's dynamics, and significant concerns and ideas expressed. Based on the discussions, the group facilitator suggests implications and makes recommendations for policy and program directions.

What Is Discussed

The company and facilitator decide which of the many important aspects of child care they will try to cover in the two hours of discussion. It is important to ask questions related to the process of finding available and affordable care in the employees' community; the employees' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with aspects of child care such as quality, cost, reliability, location, and flexibility; and employees' general concerns as working parents. Within this framework, all concerns are usually aired, and sometimes topics emerge in discussion that were not anticipated. At a recent focus group meeting a participant suggested part-time work as a solution to many working parents' dilemmas. The amount of time a group spends probing an issue such as this depends on group interest and the importance of finishing the "planned" discussion; sometimes, however, the new, unplanned-for issue becomes one of the more important ones to the company.

The questions asked and answers received in a focus group are only one part of the important information collected. For example, in the three focus groups held at Time Inc., not only did the response differ from group to group but the method of communication did as well. While some groups talked freely about child care problems, others with similar problems were more reserved.

Employee Discontent

Some companies are cautious about using focus group because they fear they will open a "Pandora's box" of discontent. These companies assume employees will increase each other's dissatisfactions, gripe about company policy, and perhaps even demand changes premature to company plans. We have not found this to be true. The way in which questions are phrased in a group does not lend itself to argumentative discussion. Employees are questioned as consumers of child care--not as experts on human resource policy planning. Discussion revolves around personal experiences. Parents are asked, for example, "What would make it easier for you?" and <u>not</u> "What do you think the company should do to help?"

Speculative questions concerning company plans may be easily answered in the group setting, first by stating that the company is taking a beginning step to understand the problems of working parents, and then by answering questions about company plans frankly and clearly if they emerge during the discussion. This statement and the opportunity to speak out in themselves are often a great relief to employees who may have been hesitant to identify themselves as parents in the

workplace, and have had no opportunity to share their stress with others in a similar situation. Even the knowledge that the employer is aware of their special problems may reduce tension.

The group situation allows employees to counter each other's unrealistic demands, and to avoid the natural antagonism that can occur when the employer responds to these inappropriate requests. In one group, for example, someone suggested that the company should pay for all her child care costs. This unrealistic demand was countered by another employee in the group, who did not feel that her child care problems were the company's responsibility. Through the group process, with feedback from one's own peers, resentment that may otherwise grow tends to be diffused.

Finally, the focus group can bring the employee closer to understanding the dilemmas of corporate decision making. In one group, during a discussion of restructuring benefits packages to allow for more choice and tradeoffs, an employee suggested that she shouldn't have to give up anything--that child care should be an additional benefit, not one for which something else is traded. The facilitator was able to put this employee's position into perspective by asking her how the company might respond to a hypothetical co-worker whose mother also needed specialized care. The employee was then able to understand the corporate dilemma of equity in benefits packages. Rather than creating tension and negativism, the focus group, properly run, can lead to a better appreciation of corporate policy making.

The Relationship Of Focus Groups To Quantitative Research

A focus group may be used alone or in conjunction with a questionnaire or survey. Companies are often reluctant to distribute questionnaires or surveys as a first step in assessing employee needs since they present no opportunity for employees to ask questions and leave room for employee speculation about company plans.

The focus group is not meant, however, to circumvent quantitative research. It is used for an entirely different purpose. It is the subjective aspects of employees' child care concerns, their highly complex and personal nature, that make the focus group an appropriate vehicle for information gathering. Unlike questionnaires, which are important tools in gathering quantitative information (numbers of working parents, ages of children, hours when child care is needed), focus groups suggest directions to pursue; a chance remark followed up in a focus group can shed new light on a subject. Focus groups allow a leader to probe answers which, when answered simply yes or no in a survey, may otherwise be misleading. For example, in one group a participant spoke sincerely about how wonderful it would be to take her baby to work. When the facilitator pressed further, it became clear that while on-site child care was a concept that everyone thought was wonderful in theory, few--including this employee--could imagine commuting with a baby.

If a company has decided that its plans are solid enough to warrant alerting the employee population through a general child care survey, they may want to follow the example of Intermedics, Inc. in Texas. At Intermedics employees were asked

to answer their questionnaires in groups, in a meeting room set aside for that purpose. A child care consultant, the developer of the questionnaire, was available to answer questions both about the survey and about company planning.

The focus group is sometimes used to bring a new dimension to or as a check on a survey already done. A quantitative tool should be used, for example, if the company plans to expend a great deal of money in building a child care facility. The company would want to be sure to know just how many parents in their present population have children of an appropriate age to use the center (at its expected date of building completion) and at what hours and what price. They would want to look at their projected employee demographics and at the community market and resources as well.

A company may also wish to use focus groups after using a quantitative tool. For instance, if a survey indicated that many parents would "definitely use such a center," an employer might use focus groups to explore what the parents were imagining when they said "yes" to such a center: how large a center parents were imagining, what kind of educational philosophy they were expecting, and what they thought their role would be in the center. A focus group may flag a potential problem, an area where parental expectations were quite different from those of the corporation.

Finally, focus groups should also be used in conjunction with general surveys for marketing purposes. When a company has made the decision, based on its research, to offer a new benefit or service, it will want to position that benefit to be maximally appealing to employees. The language used by respondents in a focus group--their description of services, adjectives applied to likes and dislikes--will be helpful to the company later on, during this marketing phase. For example, many parents in group discussion indicated that they particularly enjoy watching their children play with other children. The appeal of peer interaction ("Does your toddler need a friend?") may then be incorporated into a marketing strategy if the company is planning to offer a direct service, or is trying to interest employees in using a child care center that the company is sponsoring.

Conclusion

Many companies are beginning to explore the child care concerns of their parent employees. Others are concerned about this issue but unsure of how to respond in the most effective and most appropriate way. Child care focus groups can be an extremely useful tool in this process. The format of small group discussions composed of different employee groups yields qualitative information on the many aspects of employee child care. Used in conjunction with a facilitator or a facilitating organization, focus groups can give a company a better understanding of the child care picture as it relates to its own specific employee population and help the company decide how to respond.

Without making the commitment to one response, the employer receives valuable guidance from employees' experiences. This information is likely to point to ways of shaping more effective corporate policy, based on actual employee needs. By

listening to its working parents, a company demonstrates interest and concern and makes policy formulation a two-way process; employees appreciate the company's concern, while often becoming aware of the difficulties of developing a fair, practical company response.

For more information about issues addressed in this report, contact Phyllis Silverman, Manager, Catalyst's Corporate Child Care Resource, 14 East 60th Street, New York, NY 10022.

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